DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 602 CG 010 430

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TITLE The Women's Resource Centre: An Educational Model for Counseling Women.
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Guidance and Counseling Association (Vancouver, British Columbia, June 4-6, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Counseling Centers; *Counseling Services; *Educational Needs; Females; Higher Education; Personal Growth; Program Descriptions; Program Development; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS University of British Columbia

ABSTRACT

This paper is an account of content and development of the programs and services of the University of British Columbia, Centre for Continuing Education's Women's Resources Centre. The centre is designed to meet the needs of adult women who wish to move toward emotional and economic self-sufficiency. An educational, learning skills approach is used to design appropriate programs. One of the components of the service described in the paper is a training and volunteer employment program for women who help staff the centre. The forms that counselling takes within the centre are described. (Author)

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THE WOMEN'S RESOURCES CENTRE

AN EDUCATIONAL MODEL FOR COUNSELLING WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, women are revising their expectations of their lives. They are looking for ways to participate more fully in the decision-making of their society. However, they are discovering that the worlds of work and higher education have been tailored to fit men's lives and do not meet the needs of women who bear and raise children.

The Women's Resources Centre has designed programs and services which take into account the discontinuous nature of women's participation in out-of-the-home activities. It provides a model of how a women's centre can be set up by thinking through the learning needs of adult women and designing informal short term educational packages which then become the basis of the service.

BACKGROUND

The Women's Resources Centre is a new and rapidly developing program of the University of British Columbia Centre for Continuing Education. It grew directly out of the Daytime Program which offers a wide variety of non-degree courses for adults for whom daytime is the most convenient time to learn. 95% of participants in daytime courses were originally family women who wanted to be at home with husband and family in the evenings and it was soon apparent that there were many women in need of new directions for their lives.

Many women appeared to need assistance and support toward re-directing their lives.

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They were out of touch, their confidence had suffered, and in domestic-based lives they no longer knew what options and alternatives might be available to them. Coming to terms with identity was a pervasive problem. Identity has not been such a pressing problem for women when they were not part of the larger world outside of home and family, but a woman today needs to know who she is, what her skills are, what she wants and what she thinks is important. Usually this is a catch-up process both for women in the home as well as for many women who have always worked and whose level of aspiration and expectation is based on the limited opportunities formerly available to employed women.

A major difficulty for women is lack of money they can call their own and it soon became clear that many women were not in a position to take advantage of opportunities for learning and growth because they did not feel they had the right to spend family income on themselves. This necessitated a change from traditional one-to-one counselling methods, and the development of a new plan whereby educational counselling could be made available by means of programs and services.

METHOD, STRUCTURE, FINANCING

The Women's Resources Centre provides a wide range of short courses which can teach women the skills and attitudes necessary for living in the new world of women and the new behaviors necessary to adapt successfully to it.

It is in the use of groups that the form of counselling developed at the Women's Resources Centre differs from traditional one-to-one counselling. Groups become classes and short courses tailored to fit a variety of women's needs. All are designed to further growth and encourage self-determination, all can be taken in varying combinations, all are optional allowing a woman to proceed at her own pace. All elements fit together in varying patterns for the particular needs and stages of women's lives. Women proceed through the counselling process at their own perceptation of their needs as these relate to personal and financial possibilities and constraints.

Women then see their own growth and development as an educational enterprise, as liberation in the form of ideas and experiences that can contribute to

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individual and family lives, as the next step in their lives, a step that is 'normal' in its consistency with past individual and social patterns.

The guiding rationale for the Centre has been that women are capable of much more than cultural norms for adult women would suggest. Indeed it seemed to us that living out the cultural expectations worked against women developing their potential. Though staff working at the Women's Resources Centre are feminists and committed to the politics of change for women, the Centre itself is not avowedly 'feminist' but 'woman' in focus. Counselling naturally reflects the views of those who counsel with emphasis placed on a woman's right to define herself and the consequent need to clarify identity and learn new behaviors and useful skills. Feminism is thus more conspicuous in the expectations and environment of the Centre than as a political philosophy which is a necessary pre-condition for those desiring service.

The Centre exists within the framework of the UBC Centre for Continuing Education thus enabling people to define themselves as being in search of life related skills rather than labeling themselves as "problems". The decision to call the WRC a Life Planning Service has the effect of mobilizing a woman's capacity for self-direction. Working in an educational environment it is natural for us and our clients to view all programs and services in terms of a learning model.

The first thing a women encounters at the Centre is a large amount of information: tables, shelves and tack boards with printed material about formal and informal educational possibilities in Vancouver, how to go about finding a job, some job descriptions, current events of interest to women and information about the women's movement. We have learned that with a bit of help and a lot of information about how to find your way around the world, many women are able to move ahead on their own. Women seeking to change their lives do not perceive themselves as needing "counselling", rather they need information for self-direction.

The atmosphere of the Centre is open and the staff accessible but as well there is a let's-get-on-with-it attitude displayed in line with our goal that women will leave with a clearer sense of what their next steps might be.

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PROGRAMS

All programs focus on the concept of self-development. The program is planned for three groups of women:

1) Women whose main responsibility is the family.

2) Women whose main responsibility is in the family but who are beginning to think about returning to the labour force and women who have the double responsibility of family and employment.

3) Women whose main life is on the job.

Because women's needs and expectations are changing so rapidly, program development plays an important role in keeping the services relevant. Programs are planned collaboratively with program leaders. Program development comes from discussions with this group about methods used, class composition and response as well as feedback from participants and community consultation work with women's groups. After a program model is developed and tried out, it is often adapted to meet the special needs of a new group. A request for a program for women on social assistance led to a need to develop a special approach for women reaching toward economic as well as emotional self-sufficiency. The "Developing Personal Potential" program which had been the core program for several years when most of the women who came to us were family centered was adapted to suit the new needs. Format and exercises were designed to help participants focus on individual vocational directions. A problem solving technique was taught and every woman left the group with an action plan developed by herself with feedback and ideas from all group members. Between sessions "homework" got participants involved in community exploration making contacts with people who could aid them in achieving vocational goals.

Programs are offered anywhere in the city where suitable space can be located, accessible in terms of geographic and living patterns of women. The service component of the Women's Resources Centre is in the Centre's downtown location in the Vancouver Public Library and revolves around the Associates who work in number of project areas.

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STAFFING

Working at the Centre are co-ordinator, a part-time volunteer co-ordinator, a counselling associate, students on practicums, resource persons who program on a contract basis and a core of trained and dedicated volunteer Associates. The Associates program is central to both the philosophy and implementation of the educational model. At the Centre, women volunteer their services and are provided with opportunities to learn and practice new skills, to try out new projects, to renew old expertise. Training and supervision are available to Associates, they are paid for their expenses, and have the status and responsibility of fully employed staff. They represent the Centre and speak on its behalf. The Centre serves as a bridge between old and new worlds and is a source of the foot-in-the-door skills needed by women to take advantage of the opportunities beginning to be made available to them.

Associates projects include:

The Drop-In Reception, The Information File, The Job/Talent Bank and Special Projects which Associates may wish to initiate or work on.

The Associates are trained peer counsellors who listen to and talk informally with women who come to the Centre. They help find the information on the Centre related to a woman's interests and they discuss the programs and services available through the Centre (e.g. individual Life Planning interviews, self-development groups, psychological testing). They may then refer them to other services in the city and try to provide a specialized type of referral - that of identifying people as well as places that are sensitive to women's needs.

COUNSELLING: STYLE AND ELEMENTS

The approach to counselling at the Women's Resources Centre is grounded in the belief that women are capable of self-direction and autonomy and that they can and will help themselves. In general those who come to the Centre do not require "treatment" though referrals are available for women with special problems.

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Women see their need for information as adding to and improving their lives. Often the information a woman receives is sufficient to suggest and lead to desired change but for most women more is required. Personal problems must be resolved, identity, values and interests explored, goals formulated, and a course of action planned.

Entry to counselling is frequently through an individual interview with an Associate or a Life Planning Interview with a counsellor (or the psychologist's interview after testing.) Alternatively a woman may begin by taking a short course and proceed by way of other group experiences. Not only is group learning most practical in terms of time and costs but it provides the environment most conducive to the reality testing which many women need. The opportunity in a group to hear and be heard gives a woman the sense, usually for the first time, that her concerns are not unique to herself. All express and hear guilt and fear, which in the group environment of mutuality and trust assume more realistic dimensions thus enabling a woman to proceed with a clearer sense of self.

Group leaders and resource people are chosen both for their expertise and their ability to model new roles available to women. Group methods include excercises, simulations, role-playing, fantasy, problem solving, decision making and communication skills. Behavioral modification methods are of special value in teaching new behaviors in confidence building and assertion training. All deal with a woman's feelings and attitude to herself and her relationships with significant others.

Much of the strength and impact of the method is due to the combination of the following elements:

1- personal change achieved by means of educational programs;

2- freedom of choice in rate and means of change;

3- the time limited nature of programs (12-20 hours);

4- supplementary services available when needed to implement decisions;

5- the generally purposeful and action oriented emphasis and learning environment.

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A woman moves from more or less conscious feelings of dissatisfaction, depression and unclear ideas toward articulating specific problems and solutions in her life style and situation - from the general to the particular with increasing satisfaction of being in control of her life.

The counselling process includes:

1) Individual Interviews.
2) Learning for self-development groups:

   The learning for self-development groups vary in intensity, focus and purpose and are designed not only to provide opportunities to learn about one's self, but also to be relevant to the needs of women who do and do not work. The title of the first group for women is usually "Options" which presents speakers who give information about alternatives in education, employment and community projects and family enrichment. This is the first group experience and is rewarding for women when they learn communication skills. It is also the beginning of learning about interpersonal impact and self-awareness. From this group a woman may proceed if she desires further self knowledge to a group "Developing Potential for Growth and Change" which encourages further self-learning and moves towards identity and self-realization. Emphasis is on the integration of cognitive and the experiential with women making use of the information, feedback and support of other women in the group. The realization that their concerns are not individual selfishness, inadequacy or aberration but are shared by all women holds considerable drama and encouragement and can be a break through.

3) The final course in this series "Encountering Yourself" focuses on coming to terms with oneself. It is the most intense in terms of experience and includes elements from Gestalt, Jung and Humanistic psychology. Self awareness is the goal with self acceptance and change as desired and possible.

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Increasing number of women from all socio economic groups come to the Centre. Our experience parallels that of most of the research of the women's movement that middle class, middle aged women are most aware of the need for new learning toward new directions in their lives. However, with the breakdown of marriage, middle class women are often in need of financial and other assistance and are increasingly found in welfare and single parent groups. Supplementary funds are required for programs for poor, native and immigrant women. All programs change and are added to from year to year and new programs developed as new needs emerge. The Centre also works with community groups and consults with government and women's organizations. Research and follow up on the women who come to the Centre is underway.